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THE MAGAZINE OF THE SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

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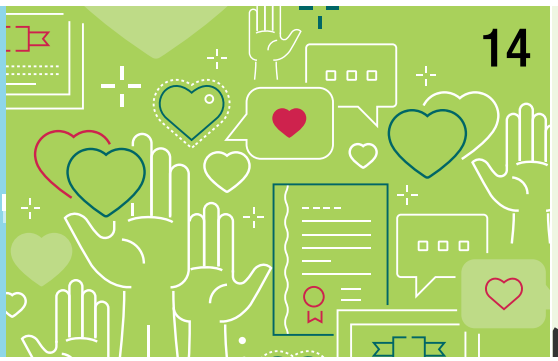

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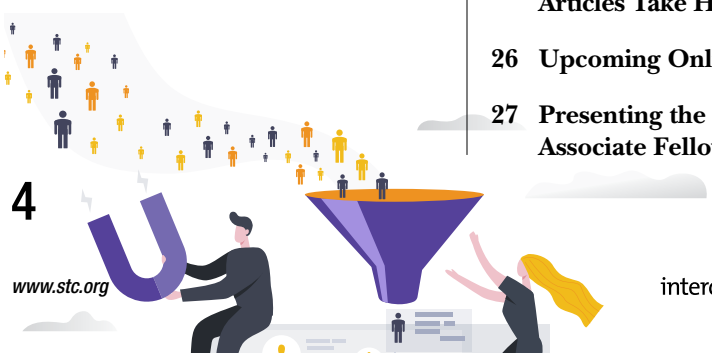

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A Note from the Editor

EACH YEAR FOR the past two years, in the January-February issue, I have cited some form of the old saw, "the only thing constant is change." Each year, I have enjoyed providing to *Intercom* readers a glimpse into the future of technical communication, and 2020 is no different. This year, I invite you to take a look *outside the box*.

What box, you ask? Whatever box you're in.

I invite you to think back to the last time you said, "We've always done it *this* way." Or "We tried that, and it doesn't work." Or "We've *never* done it that way" (the implication being that "we can't start now").

Now I invite you to explore, with curiosity, something you might previously have thought unlikely, not possible, or just plain crazy sounding.

For example, in the past I have scoffed at audio-only deliverables for technical content. And when my executives asked my teams to "put everything in video" several years ago, I quickly retorted with the ridiculous vision of API doc in video.

Was I right? Was I wrong? It doesn't really matter. What *does* matter is that we keep our minds open, we explore with curiosity things that we might at first glance dismiss, and we give ourselves the space to think outside the box … all with the goal of improving the way we design, develop, and deliver success to our customers by way of our content.

In this issue, I pulled together what might at first seem like an incongruous collection of features. My goal is to provide you with food for thought along many different dimensions—deliverables, experience design approaches, messages and connections with our human users, and ways that our content can change the world. I hope that at least one article will cause you to stop and think a bit more, a bit deeper, about how—if you were curiously exploring all possibilities—the ideas would apply to your customers and how you can deliver wild success to them.

First up, Scott Abel, The Content Wrangler, provides an in-depth perspective on personalizing technical documentation experiences. Sound like old hat? Perhaps we've heard the message before, but the prevalence (or lack thereof) of truly personalized technical content experiences validates this as thinking outside the box.

Jennifer Goode, a Technical Communication Instructor at Mercer University, asks "How might podcasts change the landscape of technical communication?" And she makes the case for considering podcasting for technical content—or re-considering it, if you previously dismissed audio documentation, as I did. If you jumped out of the box and explored (with curiosity) the idea of audio-only content, how could you use it to support your users and benefit your company?

Kathleen Franks describes the key skills, approaches, and techniques of technical communication—in particular storytelling and relating to the humanity of the people served—that can help nonprofit organizations to get donors interested and keep them informed and donating. Have you recently—or ever—leveraged storytelling to connect more with your users to help them *and your company* to succeed?

And in our final feature, Gaya Gamhewage, Richelle George, and Heini Utunen of the World Health Organization discuss risk communi-

cation, in particular for influenza events, making a key point that is becoming more and more relevant and important for all kinds of technical, scientific, and specialized information. That is, that our communication does not exist in a vacuum; we must understand all types of contexts, including social and cultural, to ensure our messages "land." While this is not an uncommon concept, it is far too infrequently considered when we design our content, and thus it is squarely outside of the box for too many of us and our teams.

- In "Editing Matters," Michelle Corbin thinks outside the box and asserts that content is a type of user interface.
- On the future theme, Cindy Currie and Kit Brown-Hoekstra in "Ask a Manager" provide managers' perspectives on preparing for the future in technical communication, and they provide advice on dealing with bullying in the workplace.
- In "The Academic Conversation," Thomas Barker describes the academic style in writing and compares it with technical communication, introducing us to the concept of *register* and explaining the tech comm register.

Don't forget to check out the Society pages for updates on the latest happenings around STC!

And let's have a conversation! We've included author and columnist email addresses so that you can get in touch. My email address is here, too! We can also discuss articles and issues with you online, so we hope that you'll ask a question or start or join a conversation!

Until next time: To your curious explorations of tech comm outside the box!

— Andrea L. Ames
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It's Time We Start Personalizing Technical Documentation Experiences

By SCOTT ABEL | *STC Associate Fellow*

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CONSUMERS WANT—and increasingly expect—convenience. They don't enjoy working hard to locate relevant answers to their questions. They don't yearn to learn how you organized your content, nor do they fancy figuring out how to circumnavigate your documentation portal.

When they need to ask a question, they want you to provide a relevant answer quickly, most often on-demand and not via a PDF that contains more information than they require (and which makes them responsible for finding it).

Many technical communication professionals today worry that presenting consumers with too many options can harm business. That's understandable. Patience is in short supply on the Web, with most Web visits lasting only a few seconds before the searcher decides to abandon the quest.

Furthermore, information overload is a bad thing. It occurs when we present more information than the brain can process at one time. Information overload causes what cognitive neuroscientists refer to as *analysis paralysis*—a situation in which users get so overwhelmed *and annoyed* that they give up and stop looking for the answer.

Too much content and not enough patience leads to the right content going undiscovered. Analysts at Sirius Decisions say 60 to 70 percent of B2B product content goes unused.

Information overload causes what cognitive neuroscientists refer to as *analysis paralysis*—a situation in which users get so overwhelmed *and annoyed* that they give up and stop looking for the answer.

A Tsunami of Information Is Overwhelming Consumers

The tsunami of information available to consumers today is a double-edged sword: On one hand, the more information available to consumers, the better informed they can be. On the other hand, the more information available to consumers, the more stressful their quest for relevant answers—especially in situations where we fail to help reduce the amount of friction caused by excessive information availability.

Irrelevant content is not useful. It hinders productivity and creates a cognitive overload. Too many choices disrupt focus, damage memory, introduce confusion and frustration, and distract consumers from their intended purpose: Finding relevant information.

According to Accenture, helping your prospects and customers avoid information overload is an opportunity to differentiate your company from the competition. Nearly 40% of online shoppers surveyed have abandoned a website because they were overwhelmed with too many options.

Presenting too much information to individuals looking for help solving technical challenges can lead to information overload. Irrelevant or conflicting technical documentation creates frustration and confusion. Too much information increases the likelihood that your customers might call your support center or seek answers to their questions elsewhere.

Less is more. Having access to too much irrelevant technical documentation content is the same as not having enough relevant content.

When you fail to provide personalized technical documentation experiences, you shift the cognitive burden of discovery to consumers. If the content experience shifts the burden to consumers, your content is the problem.

Consumers Desire Relevance Most in Personalized Content Experiences

University of Texas researchers found that consumers respond positively to personalized content, because those consumers perceive that they have a *higher degree of control* over their content experience. Personalization creates the perception that the information was tailored to address the needs of a specific individual, the researchers say.

Amazon and Netflix do personalization right. And their efforts shape consumer expectations for personalized experiences everywhere.

Amazon says its efforts to provide individualized content recommendations have been amazingly successful: 86 percent of consumers say personalization has a significant impact on the purchasing decisions they make; 45 percent of shoppers are more likely to purchase products from vendors that provide personalized product content recommendations; and 56 percent of those consumers say they are more likely to make repeat purchases with brands that provide personalized experiences.

Personalization involves getting the right pieces of content in front of the right person, at the right time, in the right place, in the format that individual requires, and in essential ways that provide value to them.

To implement personalized technical documentation, you must be able to leverage taxonomy. Organizations that succeed in this arena focus their efforts on providing *relevance*, the guiding principle of personalization, says Lawrence Orin, Product Evangelist and Customer Implementation Expert at Zoomin Software, a platform that allows documentation teams to deliver individualized technical documentation experiences.

Personalization "enables you to cross-sell and up-sell products. It allows you to present pertinent recommendations and the content individuals want to see," says Orin.

"To personalize at scale," he advises, "you need content that's designed to facilitate personalized delivery, actionable data about individuals in your audience, and a software platform that's engineered to manage and deliver individualized content experiences."

Taxonomy makes the personalization of technical documentation possible. Most technical communication teams already think in taxonomical terms.

"It makes sense to technical writers to tag their content by *product name*, *version*, and by *user role,"* says Orin.

"Taxonomy allows them to provide documentation appropriate for individuals with a specific role (like Progress Software does; see Figure 1), who need to understand how to use product A, version Y in the context of the job they perform."

> Personalization involves getting the right pieces of content in front of the right person, at the right time, in the right place, in the format that individual requires, and in essential ways that provide value to them.

However, Orin warns, these three tags alone are insufficient to deliver the type of high-quality personalized content experiences consumers expect today.

Filling the Personalization Capability Gap: The Four Rs of Personalization

Consumers are more likely to spend more than they had planned in response to personalized product recommendations and offers, according to guidance from Gartner contained in their ebook, *Maximize the Impact of Personalization*. Additionally, Gartner found, consumers that experienced a high level of personalization provided 20 percent higher Net Promoter Scores (NPS) than those consumers who experienced a low level of personalization.

Figure 1. Progress Software's roles.

Consumers want fresh and unique experiences delivered quickly. Consumer preference researchers say consumers want frictionless and accessible experiences no matter when, where, or how they might be interacting with your brand. If you seek their loyalty, they want you to deliver meaningful, relevant, personalized experiences—every time.

Fifty-eight percent of consumers surveyed by Accenture Interactive say they are more likely to make a purchase when a company offers them personalized recommendations based on purchase history or personal preferences.

The disconnect between the type of content experiences consumers desire and the ability of an organization to provide them is known as the *personalization capability gap*.

Content personalization is a big project. Doing it right—and across all channels you support—can be challenging. Doing it right requires developing capability.

There's an entire industry sector dedicated to helping companies adopt content personalization strategies, as well as a non-profit educational organization (Consortium of Personalization Professionals) working to develop best practices for creating and maintaining personalized content experiences.

Orin recommends starting your journey toward creating personalized content experiences by using a checklist to guide your technical documentation personalization efforts—the Four Rs of Personalization: A list of the three things you must do (*Recognize*, *Remember*, and *Recommend*) to produce *Relevant*, personalized technical documentation experiences.

Personalized experiences require you to *recognize* the person you are hoping to engage, *remember* the information they provide you (or that you can glean from their interactions with you and others), and use the information you remember to provide content *recommendations*.

Let's take a look at three things you must do to provide personalized technical documentation experiences.

Recognize

Personalized technical documentation experiences require us to *recognize* individuals (a prospective or an existing customer) by associating them with a user profile. Basic profiles might capture *user name*, *contact information*, and *photo*, but the addition of more user-specific metadata to the profile makes it possible to deliver more relevant technical documentation experiences. Storing information about users — like *role* (job function), *level of access* (what content they're permitted to see), *level of expertise*, *location*, *language*, *device preferences*, and *customer, account*, and *membership information*—allow us to provide targeted experiences.

Remember

To provide personalized recommendations, you must be able to *remember* things about the individuals who you are attempting to serve. And you must be able to use what is remembered to inform the *recommendations* you'll make to meet the needs of that individual consumer.

Recommend

"'[Insert name here]' is not a personalization strategy," says user experience manager, Colin Eagan. "It's an unsophisticated tactic — it's a lackluster attempt at addressing the needs of the organization by professing to address the needs of consumers."

Some organizations fail at personalization because they run toward the basics, the low-hanging fruit. They begin by personalizing content based on a person's name and birthdate. While this may seem like a good first step, it's not. Consumers don't find this type of personalization (recognizing someone by name or wishing them happy birthday) all that useful. Only 8 percent of those surveyed by Pure360 said addressing them by name is likely to motivate them to consume your content or take advantage of your offer.

"Some companies get content personalization right," says Eagan, a member of the Consortium of Personalization Professionals. If you don't know where to start your personalization program, Eagan recommends you consider mimicking the efforts of others, learning from their successes and failures.

Take Amazon, for example. Amazon puts the individual customer front and center. The company is a pioneer in the personalized content arena and has focused on delivering the best experiences possible. Amazon customers don't

Personalized technical documentation experiences require us to *recognize* individuals (a prospective or an existing customer) by associating them with a user profile.

need to do anything to set up product recommendations (although customers can tweak the system to influence and improve recommendations).

Amazon serves up content to website visitors automatically in the form of recommendations. The company combines customer data (Web browsing, purchasing, and other measurable behaviors) with demographic and current-event data to serve up suggestions that should provide value to the individual shopper.

Amazon's personalization efforts have helped to differentiate it from the competition and allowed it to capture more than 50 percent of the total U.S. retail eCommerce market and nearly 15 percent of worldwide eCommerce sales.

By remembering what it learns, Amazon can make inferences from the data that help them provide content that is relevant to individual consumers.

Personalized content recommendations work for Amazon. The company claims that 35% of sales come from personalized content recommendations.

Amazon doesn't rely solely on user profile data to improve content effectiveness. It also learns about consumer preferences from the crowd. Amazon uses deep machine learning (think Big Data meets Artificial Intelligence) to monitor the habits of its customers. By remembering what it learns, Amazon can make inferences from the data that help them provide content that is relevant to individual consumers. This approach might allow them to determine that most of their customers that like X, also enjoy Y. In practice, this enables Amazon to know whether visitors who shop for non-toxic cookware from its flagship online mall might also be interested in ordering organic produce delivery from its grocery distribution channel, Whole Foods.

While some people are uncomfortable with companies like Amazon collecting personal data (and for good reason), 70 percent of consumers say they don't mind if service providers collect their personal information as long as they are transparent and responsible about how they use it.

Amazon also makes its capabilities available for free to others (that means you) who want to serve up personalized recommendations.

Netflix is another company that has developed personalized content experiences that have helped change user expectations while reducing company expenses. The company's content recommendation engine recommended 80 percent of the videos watched by Netflix customers. Company leaders report that personalizing viewer experiences save the company over $1 billion a year in unnecessary expenses.

Offering up irrelevant content recommendations, like offering a product that the customer already owns or offering content that is incongruent with user needs, behaviors, and preferences, violates the "recommend," "remember," and "relevant" rules, Orin says.

Personalization Versus Localization

Personalization involves tailoring content so that it aligns with the preferences, interests, and characteristics of *individual consumers*. Localized technical documentation experiences may address fundamental needs—like presenting content in the preferred language of a *specific region* or *group of people*—and still fall flat with those who consume it.

"Personalization increases the utility and relevance of localized technical documentation and allows us to focus our efforts on delivering hyper-relevant content experiences at scale," says Orin.

Leaders of many successful organizations have attributed their market growth and industry dominance to their ability to provide personalized content experiences. Technical documentation teams are beginning to recognize that consumers search the Web for product information before purchasing.

"An exceptional customer experience is no longer a nice-to-have; it's a requirement for today's digitally savvy

"Increasingly, organizations are discovering that their technical documentation content can become a powerful conduit for product discovery."

consumers," says Rahel Anne Bailie, Director of Content for Babylon Health.

"Today, publishing machine-friendly, technical documentation content can deliver dramatic improvements in search engine optimization, leading to increases in organic Web traffic," Bailie points out. "Increasingly, organizations are discovering that their technical documentation content can become a powerful conduit for product discovery."

Traditionally, technical documentation has been considered post-sale content—that is, information provided to consumers *only after* they purchase a product or service.

"The view of technical documentation as a post-sale deliverable created solely to provide information to existing customers is outdated. It overlooks the importance of technical content as digital bait for prospective customers," says Enterprise Content Strategy Consultant, Charles Cooper of The Rockley Group.

"The good news is that the outdated view of technical documentation is changing," Cooper says. "Increasingly, sales leaders are recognizing that technical documentation can solidify the satisfaction of existing customers *and* serve to attract and convert prospects into purchasers."

Bailie, co-author of the book *Content Strategy: Connecting the Dots Between Business, Brand, and Benefits*, says that personalizing technical documentation experiences allows us to humanize the content experience. Personalization brings us closer to "connecting with the interests, passions, and aspirations of our prospective and existing customers," Bailie adds.

"Establishing relevance with consumers, in a world in which many personalized consumer interactions are the norm, requires us to work to improve the effectiveness and utility of technical documentation by ensuring the content we offer is laser-targeted to the individual. Personalization can increase the perceived helpfulness of your content," Bailie says, "reducing consumer frustration and confusion, helping you to build trust and loyalty."

"The key is to focus on improving the consumer experience," Bailie says. "When you personalize content, it shows individual consumers that you value them and desire to be of service," she continues. "The investments you make in helping users avoid doing extra work pay off in the form of brand trust and customer loyalty."

Bailie recommends that tech comm teams who aim to improve content experiences ensure that the personalized information they develop includes simple-to-implement but often overlooked improvements. One easy first step is to localize technical documentation to ensure it reflects the currencies, units of measure, time zones, and local rules, laws, and regulations in use where your customers live and work.

"Making your content more meaningful, appropriate, and effective for a particular culture, locale, group, or market is the goal of localization. When you add personalization to the mix, your goal becomes the delivery of the right content to the right individual user at the right time," says Bailie.

One easy first step is to localize technical documentation to ensure it reflects the currencies, units of measure, time zones, and local rules, laws, and regulations in use where your customers live and work.

Consumers Expect Personalized Content Experiences

While Amazon has led the way in personalizing product shopping experiences, Netflix has done an equally impressive job at delivering personalized content experiences that both delight consumers and deliver business value to the company. For Netflix, personalization doesn't just involve pushing entertainment suggestions to each customer. It also involves personalizing or localizing the images displayed with those recommendations.

The Netflix personalized recommendations strategy not only involves suggesting the best titles to its customers, but it also serves up personalized artwork for each title that the system predicts might be compelling to you. The algorithm attempts to present the best possible list of titles, explicitly prioritized for you, based on your previous viewing habits.

The act of personalizing images that accompany recommendations presumes you'll view the image as *evidence* for why the recommendation might be the right choice for *you*. The artwork delivered might feature a performer you recognize, draw your attention to a mind-blowing space invasion, or illustrate a theatrical scene that communicates the essence of a motion picture or TV show. These efforts help you discover new content that satisfies your needs and keeps you coming back to Netflix for more.

Consumers subconsciously expect similar personalization efforts when they interact with your content. That's important to understand, because 89 percent of digital consumers say they won't buy from you after just *one experience* that fails to meet expectations.

Everywhere you look, personalization is becoming the norm. Consumers encounter personalized experiences throughout their daily lives. From the voice-enabled devices that wake them from sleep, remind them of upcoming appointments, and warn them to prepare for severe

weather or to avoid traffic delays, personalized experiences are so ubiquitous that consumers expect them.

Eighty-four percent of customers rank being treated as a person (not a number) as "very important" to winning their business. While individualized experiences are becoming the de facto experience consumers expect, there's considerable room for improvement in implementation. As consumers' expectations for exceptional experiences rise, their patience for—and tolerance of—mediocre content encounters wanes.

According to Gartner, only 12 percent of consumers feel like current personalization efforts meet their expectations.

While consumers have concerns about privacy and data security, a report by Boston Consulting Group finds that most are willing to share their data if they think you'll use it to make their experience more convenient and relevant.

Researchers at Advertising Research Foundation (ARF) found that consumer willingness to share data may be waning. Consumers were slightly less likely to share their data in 2019 than they were in 2018, ARF says.

Many organizations practice personalization sparingly—or selectively—and of those that do, most aren't measuring whether a personalized content experience leads to improved content performance. That's not true of streaming media platforms like Hulu, Netflix, Pandora, and Spotify. Companies in this sector are more likely to be sophisticated regarding content personalization as it is at the heart of everything they offer.

While you might desire to better serve the needs, preferences, and desires of consumers by providing individualized content experiences, it's essential to recognize that you're aiming at a moving target. There's no single content organization or delivery scheme that can meet the changing needs of every individual human being every time. Interests, needs, situations, locations, careers, relationships, and intents change from day to day, and people evolve their thinking on subjects, and as a result, their information needs change.

Tackling the personalization of your technical documentation content is an endeavor worth pursuing. While it can be challenging to get it right, avoiding the mistakes made by others before you and putting their lessons to work for you are good first steps. Measuring performance is required in order to demonstrate value from your efforts.

Many organizations practice personalization sparingly—or selectively—and of those that do, most aren't measuring whether a personalized content experience leads to improved content performance.

There's an evolving services industry taking shape that is dedicated to helping companies adopt content personalization strategies. And there's a non-profit educational organization (Consortium of Personalization Professionals) working to develop best practices for creating and maintaining personalized content experiences.

Your job is to overcome the personalization capability gap—the disconnect between the type of content experiences consumers desire and the ability of your organization to provide them. Mimicking the successes of those who get it right, and building on the lessons shared by others in technical communication circles, will help you start off on the right foot.

SCOTT ABEL *is the Founder and President of The Content Wrangler Inc., a global content strategy consultancy. Scott is a content management strategist and exponential growth evangelist. He specializes in helping content-heavy organizations improve the way they author, maintain, publish, deliver, and archive their information assets. Scott publishes a series of content strategy books for XML Press and is the producer of several content industry events including Technical Documentation Roundup and Information Development World.*

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Podcasting: Is It for Tech Comm?

By JENNIFER GOODE | *STC Senior Member*

Feodora Chiosea/iStock

Podcasting can also boost marketing efforts by bringing personality to brands through corporate sponsorships, product placement, and expert testimonials.

PODCASTING IS ONE of the fastest growing areas of content production today—but should technical communicators pay attention? Edison Research reports more than 144 million Americans have listened to podcasts, and 62 million listen weekly—a trend that has continued to grow over the past seven years. Such rapid and widespread growth demands a closer examination of this content delivery strategy.

Podcasting is the practice of digitally recording and broadcasting content over the Internet for consumption via computer or mobile device. A podcast can be downloaded and played anytime. Often created as a series, podcasts are usually produced around a specific topic for a specific audience. Audiences can subscribe to a series or download individual episodes, and because the content is digitally stored and shared over the Internet, it can become accessible at any place and at any time.

With a variety of content to choose from, listeners will never get bored. Podcasts cover topics like society and culture, news and politics, comedy, sports, business, and more. According to MusicOomph.com, there are more than 700,000 active podcasts and more than 29 million podcast episodes in more than 100 different languages. And those numbers are growing daily as podcasters create new shows and episodes.

Podcasts Are Unique

But how are podcasts different from other delivery mediums? Podcasting is particularly unique compared to other forms of content. Podcast content provides downloadable, portable, repeatable content that is always available to users no matter the time or location. Once content is downloaded, podcasts can be consumed without an Internet connection, making them location independent.

Podcasting can also boost marketing efforts by bringing personality to brands through corporate sponsorships, product placement, and expert testimonials. Social media communities, a valuable marketing resource, often form around podcasts. And as podcast episodes are integrated into the web of information on the internet, they contribute to search engine optimization (SEO) efforts.

Why Podcasting Matters in Technical Communication

Podcasts are successfully reaching audiences at extremely high rates, and technical communication practitioners should consider whether podcasts might be suitable for reaching target audiences with their content.

Podcasts are usually consumed in their entirety

According to Edison Research, 93% of people who start a podcast listen to the entire podcast or most of the episode. That's a staggering statistic that can't be matched by other communication mediums.

Podcasting can be good for your brand

Podcast listeners are more likely to engage in social media and follow specific companies and brands there, as well. Listeners often become loyal podcast subscribers and are likely to follow an entire podcast series, episode by episode. Listeners have also shown more interest in purchasing products and services featured in or advertised during podcasts.

Podcasts build audiences

Podcasting can be a great tool for bringing new listeners from a variety of backgrounds into one common communication space.

Podcasts fit easily into listeners' lives

Unlike other forms of content, listeners can engage with podcasts while performing other routine activities, like driving or exercising.

Getting Started in Podcasting

If you think podcasting might be a viable medium for reaching your audience, consider the following steps to get started.

Assess your skill set

Technical communicators are perfectly positioned to take on many of these necessary skills.

- *User analysis.* Podcasters must be able to assess audience (listener) needs and provide content that the audience will value.
- *Writing.* Podcasters must be excellent writers of both structured content and scripts.
- *Editing.* Podcasting requires content planning and revision, as well as pre-production audio editing.
- *Speaking.* Podcasters must be able to clearly communicate their ideas in an oral manner.
- *Interviewing.* Podcasting offers the opportunity to integrate multiple subject matter experts and other guests. Interviewing skills can provide an enhanced listener experience and far better content.

- *Creativity*. Podcasting should integrate some creativity and originality, which helps differentiate your programming and grow listenership.
- *Organization*. Podcasting requires a lot of planning, coordination, and consistency. Good organizational practices will enhance the production process.

Gather the necessary equipment

A podcast can be produced with just a laptop, but better equipment yields better results.

- *Computer*. A computer with sound editing software (for example, Adobe Audition) will be the foundation of your equipment.
- *Microphone*. One or more high-quality microphones with boom arms, pop filters, and necessary cables will ensure that the best audio is captured during recordings.
- *Noise-canceling headphones*. Good headphones block out background noise during recordings and broadcast just the sounds coming from the microphone(s).
- *Soundboard*. A simple soundboard can channel audio input and output, while providing a basic level of control over special effects, such as speaker balancing and distortion.
- *Noise-dampening materials*. Foam sound barriers or simple fabric drapes can provide a substantial improvement in sound quality in a recording space.

Plan the podcast content

The key to excellent podcasting content is advanced planning.

- *Topic*. Choose topics that will interest your audience and compel them to act on the content presented.
- *Format*. Select a format that complements the topic and the audience's expectations. Open the episode with a welcome and an agenda. Feature a guest speaker, an event livecast, or a Q&A discussion. Finish the episode with a pitch, a way for listeners to respond to the content, and a conclusion.
- *Script*. Write a plan for every episode. Write an introduction and a conclusion. Write interview questions. Note materials and sources (like books, articles, authors, or websites) that might be mentioned during the recording. Then distribute the podcast script to podcast hosts, guest speakers, and production team members. Everyone should know how the podcast will proceed before recording begins.
- *Supporting media*. Integrated media, like music, sound effects, and cover art, can enhance listeners' podcast experience.

Record and publish the podcast

Now you're ready to produce the episodes.

- *Record*. Record the podcast in a small, sound-proof room. Don't worry too much about errors; good editing can cover a number of sins.
- *Edit*. Remove verbal pauses, duplicate statements, and any other errors that might detract from the intended message and content. Add in supporting media, like sound effects and music, as desired.
- *Publish*. Typically, publishing requires a website and a media host (for example, Libsyn or Blubrry). You can also publish your podcast to a directory (for example, Spotify) or via an RSS feed.

Conclusion

How might podcasts change the landscape of technical communication? What content will move into podcasting formats to support product use, problem resolution, or other user-driven tasks? Only time will tell, but in the meantime, technical communicators would be wise to keep podcasting in mind as an effective alternative for distributing some kinds of content to certain audiences. The format is exploding in reach and distribution. The low costs and simple publication process put podcast production within reach for many technical communication practitioners. And podcast completion rates are pretty impressive, too!

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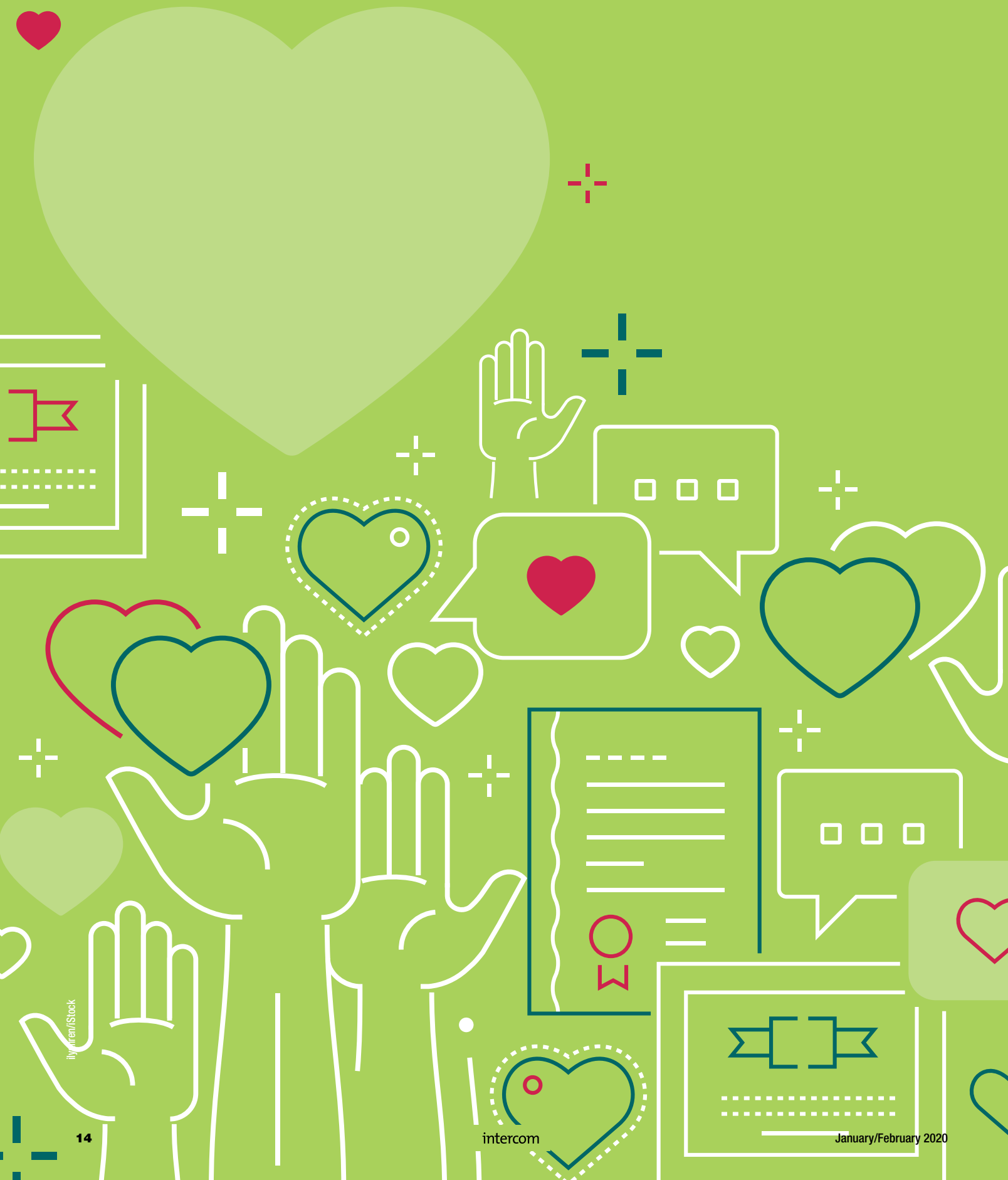

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Empathetic Activism: How Nonprofits Can Use Technical Communication to Change Lives

By KATHLEEN FRANKS

WHEN YOU THINK about the types of roles one could have in a nonprofit organization, your first thoughts might include executive director, volunteer coordinator, or fundraising organizer. Technical writer might not cross your mind, but even if a nonprofit employee doesn't have the official title of technical writer, they likely use technical communication skills, techniques, and approaches without realizing it.

Nonprofit organizations have big tasks to accomplish: garnering financial support, destigmatizing

a problem, and helping people who often belong to marginalized or misunderstood groups and communities. Accordingly, nonprofits have to pay special attention to the way they frame problems, portray people, and communicate with the public. Technical communication plays a major role in each of these activities.

Nonprofits and Technical Communication Are Human-Centered

Nonprofits and technical communication intersect at their mutual interest in humanity. Without advocacy, neither nonprofits nor technical communication would be as meaningful to the world. Technical writers advocate for their users every day by creating usable documents that can make their users' lives easier. Nonprofits advocate by providing services, support, and supplies to people in need. Advocacy can take many different forms, but true advocacy is always human-centered.

Technical communication is often concerned with topics like social justice, public health, and other critical matters that directly affect real-life people. Due to the nature of these subjects, technical communicators have the opportunity to either advocate or cause egregious harm, as our work might influence how the public views and treats these issues. When it comes to social justice, scholars Natasha Jones and Rebecca Walton say it best: "[Technical communication] investigates how communication, broadly defined, can amplify the agency of oppressed people…. Key to this definition is a collaborative, respectful approach that moves past description and exploration of social justice issues to taking action to redress inequities." Put another way, activism can sometimes run the risk of "talking over" oppressed people's own voices. Through empathy, however, and a true desire to understand the other person's situation, needs, and goals, technical communicators can use their unique set of tools and skills to "amplify the agency" that people already possess.

The Adventure Project's Take on Empathetic Activism

When I was younger, there was a commercial for a charity that claimed you could save a child in a developing country by donating only cents a day. The narrator of this commercial was a grandfather-type figure with white hair and a beard, holding hands with a small, dirty little girl who had just been shown searching for scraps of food in a mountain of trash. Her guardians were nowhere to be seen. As he told her story, the narrator and the little girl looked directly into the camera. The girl never spoke a word.

While this widely used approach to fundraising may be successful, the implication is that people in impoverished areas lack the agency to survive without the generosity of strangers. The problem with this method is that it (perhaps unintentionally) helps propagate White Saviorism, which, according to Urban Dictionary, is the phenomenon of "western people going in to 'fix' the problems of struggling

Figure 1. The Adventure Project's website showcases smiling pictures of "empowered entrepreneurs," like this well mechanic in Uganda. (Photo by Esther Havens, www.estherhavens.com.)

nations or people of color without understanding their history, needs, or the nation's current state of affairs." Because the White Savior often neglects to learn about the specific context of the people they're trying to help, their blind benevolence is an act of colonialism—that is to say that they "fix" things according to how *they* best see fit, based on their own knowledge, experiences, and goals.

But this isn't always the case. In the Summer of 2018, I interned for The Adventure Project (TAP), a New York-based nonprofit that works to create jobs, such as self-sufficient farming and charcoal-efficient stove manufacturing, for people in developing countries so that they can simultaneously earn an income and help their own communities. TAP is different than many other nonprofits in that it strives to solve the problem of poverty itself rather than only treating its symptoms. Instead of giving handouts, TAP works with its partners to recruit and train local people to be entrepreneurs who provide basic health care, manufacture stoves, or sell food to people in their community.

What I love about TAP is that they work with the mindset of fostering someone's confidence, knowledge, and abilities.

If you want to feel encouraged to donate to a nonprofit, just visit TAP's website. You won't find any sad pictures of people who need your help, but vibrant photographs of smiling entrepreneurs who are sponsored by The

Adventure Project, like the well mechanic in Figure 1. What you see when you explore their website are people in developing countries who, with just a little training, are able to support themselves and provide vital services to their communities. More than anything, TAP strives to humanize the people of the "third world" and to break the stereotype that they need the West's handouts to survive. The reality is quite the contrary: Not only can they work for themselves, but they can speak for themselves as well!

For TAP, the solution to the problem depends on how you choose to see the problem. The problem isn't that people in developing countries cannot help themselves; it is that they often don't have the education or resources to get started. Through this lens, the solution is clear: Give them support to get started, and they will do the rest.

Using Storytelling Techniques of Technical Communication to Keep Donors Interested

Donors love good storytelling, and they want to see what effect their donation has had. Keeping donors involved in the narrative of the organization's cause strengthens the nonprofit's *ethos* and gives donors a sense of community and sponsorship.

During my internship, I was particularly impressed by the effectiveness of The Adventure Project's up close and personal storytelling. TAP knows that donors want to see the results of their investment, and they provide this information through a spotlight of someone who has been helped by donations. The Collective, TAP's registered monthly donors, receive a monthly email that provides updates on program progress, opportunities to get involved in upcoming initiatives, and photos of entrepreneurs in the field. Occasionally, TAP even goes above and beyond to create a personal connection between their supporters and entrepreneurs. In 2017, TAP surprised Mandy, one of their fundraisers, with a visit from Diana, a well mechanic from Uganda who had, at that time, been able to fix 54 broken wells thanks to TAP supporters' donations. TAP's conscious effort to make their donors feel involved and appreciated has kept 285 donors coming back month after month.

Keeping donors involved in the narrative of the organization's cause strengthens the nonprofit's *ethos* and gives donors a sense of community and sponsorship.

The Targeted Solutions page of TAP's website gives context to each of their four focus areas (the environment, hunger, health, and water) by describing the problem as it relates to a specific location and how TAP entrepreneurs can improve the situation.

Even if someone doesn't want to give monthly, they can still see how their one-time donation will help someone. The Targeted Solutions page of TAP's website gives context to each of their four focus areas (the environment, hunger, health, and water) by describing the problem as it relates to a specific location and how TAP entrepreneurs can improve the situation. The Environment section, for example, shows the before and after photos of a Kenyan woman whose life has been changed by a TAP-sponsored stove mason (see Figure 2). In the before photo, the woman is shown coughing over a smoky open flame, clearly uncomfortable. Below this photo, the caption reads, in part, "Four million people die each year from breathing in toxic cooking smoke." The after photo shows the same woman, now smiling, cooking over a charcoal-efficient stove that she was able to purchase thanks to a TAP entrepreneur (and TAP donors). Below this photo is a description of the various positive implications of a charcoal-efficient cookstove. Though the caption doesn't specifically mention the health impact, it is implied that families who use a charcoal-efficient stove will have less risk of developing smoke-related illnesses. In this example, TAP's audience sees how a simple charcoal stove can change someone's lifestyle, disposition, and health.

By using simple photographs and blurbs, TAP keeps the focus on entrepreneurs in a way that doesn't rob them of dignity or agency. TAP donors aren't just giving people stoves and leaving; they are helping someone to learn a trade, make a living, and provide an ongoing service. Supporters feel empowered, because they see how their donations are used to empower someone else. They use this information to inform their future decisions to donate and to persuade other people to donate.

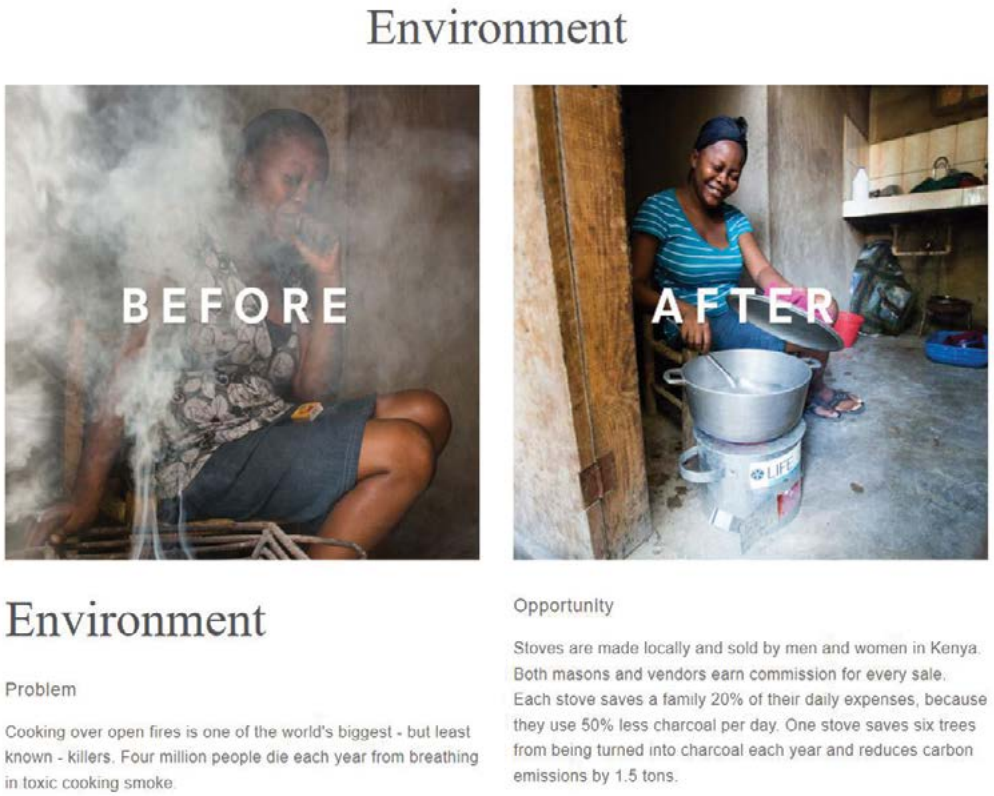
Environment
BEFORE
AFTER
Environment
Problem
Cooking over open fires is one of the world's biggest - but least known - killers. Four million people die each year from breathing in toxic cooking smoke.
Opportunity
Stoves are made locally and sold by men and women in Kenya. Both masons and vendors earn commission for every sale. Each stove saves a family 20% of their daily expenses, because they use 50% less charcoal per day. One stove saves six trees from being turned into charcoal each year and reduces carbon emissions by 1.5 tons.

Figure 2. TAP's Targeted Solutions page gives visitors a glimpse of how donations directly affect the lives of real people. (Photo by Esther Havens, www.estherhavens.com.)

> By using simple photographs and blurbs, TAP keeps the focus on entrepreneurs in a way that doesn't rob them of dignity or agency.

Final Thoughts

Technical communication shouldn't be a scary concept to nonprofits, because they're likely already using it. TAP proves that technical communication can be an effective tool in fundraising and empathetic storytelling. By framing the problem to focus on long-term solutions and showcasing the impact local entrepreneurs have on their communities, TAP's unique approach to charity provides an opportunity for people in developing countries to learn, grow, and prosper. When donors see how they have helped real-life people in life-changing ways, they feel encouraged to continue their support and tell others to do the same. Nonprofits don't necessarily have to do anything drastic to create a mutually beneficial experience. It can be as simple as empowering people and providing a rewarding relationship for all involved, and all of this can be conveyed using technical communication skills, techniques, and approaches.

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Risk Communication for Influenza Events

By GAYA GAMHEWAGE, RICHELLE GEORGE, HEINI UTUNEN

ACCORDING TO THE World Health Organization (WHO), risk communication is defined as "the real-time exchange of information, advice and opinions between experts, officials and the communities affected by a hazard." Risk communication is about more than just a one-way exchange of information from experts and officials to affected communities. It is characterized by the reciprocal exchange of information and communication between public health officials and affected communities, as shown in Figure 1.

For any outbreak (including an influenza epidemic) an early, proactive, and rapid public health response provides the greatest opportunity to limit morbidity and mortality and to reduce the damage caused to people's societal and economic well-being. Public health risk communication is a key component of this response.

During the 1970s, Paul Slovic researched how people perceive risk. His research found that the general public is less likely to be concerned about health risks that are voluntary, familiar, controllable, fair, non-fatal, diffuse, and slow-acting (Slovic et al. 1979). For example, a person may voluntarily decide to get into a car and not wear a seatbelt, despite the risk involved. Many people decide that it is okay to have unsafe sex or run across a crowded road. These are risks that people are willing to take precisely because they take them voluntarily.

Slovic's research found that the opposite is true for risks that are perceived to be significant. These risks are involuntary, obligatory, unfamiliar, uncontrollable, unfair, acute, fatal, and quickly traverse geographical space and time (Slovic et al. 1979). Ebola or a radio-nuclear disaster are examples of the kind of risks that, for these reasons, engender concern among the general public. Though these

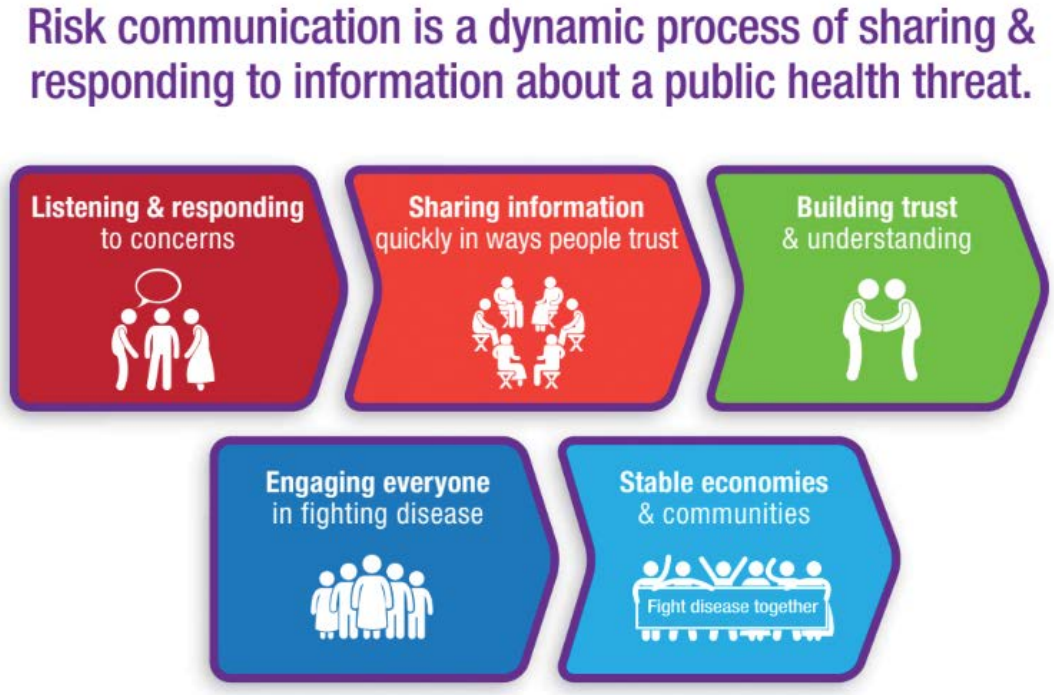
Risk communication is a dynamic process of sharing & responding to information about a public health threat.
Listening & responding to concerns
Sharing information quickly in ways people trust
Building trust & understanding
Engaging everyone in fighting disease
Stable economies & communities
Fight disease together

Figure 1. What is risk communication?

tendencies might differ in different communities, Slovic's work reflects some general factors that determine how people perceive risk. Understanding the critical influence of perception on how people behave and whether they follow an expert's advice is crucial for public health professionals.

Perception is rooted in the subconscious and is often illogical. An expert might offer logical, evidence-based, scientific information, but this might have little influence over people's perceptions, which are developed in a different part of the brain (Gifford 1986). This part of the brain is influenced by culture, colored by emotions, and not always expressed verbally. While some say that epidemiologists and scientists frame *scientific* risk, laypeople create and experience *lived* risk. The expert might think that people are agreeing with advice given to them. The perception of risk, however, will show only in people's behavior. As a result, it is key that experts and scientists (particularly bio-medical scientists) acknowledge other kinds of science, including behavioral and social science—the study of emotions, attitudes, beliefs, and customs and how these affect the communication of risk.

Much research has been done into what makes good risk communication. For the World Health Organization, Ministries of Health, and other public health organizations, technical information is a key part of effective risk communication. In addition to technical information, however, there are four other components of risk communication, as shown in Figure 2. Risk communication:

- must address the values of affected communities
- is dependent on the trust people have in authorities and experts
- depends on the credibility of the person or agency communicating the risk
- must incorporate expressions of caring

Though these five components make up effective risk communication, one component is more important than the others: trust. The trust people have in authorities, experts, and organizations is, by far, the greatest ingredient for effective risk communication. A public health expert might have accurate, factual information, but if people do not trust or believe them, people are unlikely to follow their advice. Remembering this is critical to effective risk communication.

Many strategies and tactics make up risk communication—it should not be limited to just public or media communication and social media. Risk communication also includes massive awareness initiatives, including social mobilization, community engagement, social behavior change communication, and political communication. Effective risk communication will apply most of these strategies, along with dynamic listening in interpersonal communication, as shown in Figure 3, to convey messages to key audiences.

Figure 2. The building blocks of effective risk communication.

The History Behind Risk Communication—and Lessons Learned

How risk is communicated has evolved over the last one hundred years. Figure 4 shows examples of recent epidemics.

In the early 20th century, Spanish influenza killed millions of people. During this time, there was unprecedented death and fear, partly because the public health tools of today didn't exist then.

In the 21st century, which began with new diseases like SARS, public health experts' focus on personal protection resulted in people resorting to using masks and body thermal detectors being installed in airports. SARS caused significant disruption to lives and livelihoods, as well as

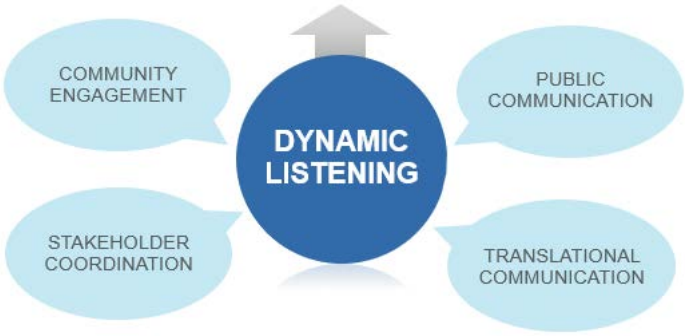

Figure 3. Dynamic listening for effective risk communication.

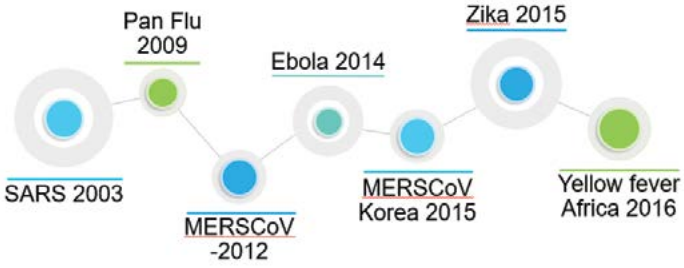

Figure 4. Examples of recent epidemics.

Epidemics in the present day are even more complicated due to high-speed travel, international trade, and a globalized world.

large-scale economic damage. Because of this, an understanding emerged that health risks and epidemics are much more than a health issue and that they have social and economic repercussions.

Epidemics in the present day are even more complicated due to high-speed travel, international trade, and a globalized world. Moreover, the contemporary world is characterized by information technology that has proliferated so widely across the globe that more than half of all people have access to the internet (Digital Information World 2018), and more people today have access to telephones than safe toilets (UN News 2013). More than half of the world's population currently lives in densely populated cities. These factors, combined, result in increased health risks, not only in relation to the emergence of diseases but the rapid amplification of these diseases into epidemics and pandemics.

Public health practitioners have learned many lessons over the years. From the outbreak of SARS in 2003, they learned that disease epidemics are much more than health-related issues. They learned that even wealthy countries can become paralyzed by disease outbreaks and that economies may suffer for many years. Through SARS, public health officials witnessed the way that a disease can be exported to many parts of the world through travel. Though SARS was a milder pandemic than the world had anticipated, several hundred thousand people died. In addition, there was a lack of trust in public health institutions and many rumors and conspiracy theories about the origin of the disease abounded.

In 2012, during the spread of Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) in the Eastern Mediterranean and Saudi Arabia, public health officials witnessed a virus rapidly amplify in hospitals and other care-giving facilities.

Beginning in 2014, the outbreak of Ebola virus disease in West Africa continued for two years and shook the world. Public health practitioners learned a great deal about risk communication during the Ebola outbreak. For example, they learned that sending out messages and putting out posters does not constitute effective risk communication and that engagement with communities—understanding what they believe and what is important to them—is key. The Ebola outbreak in West Africa revolutionized all of emergency response, and one of the biggest lessons learned was about risk communication and other social science interventions.

The year 2015 saw yet another outbreak of MERS-CoV, this time in South Korea. One infected patient introduced the disease to a new part of the world, where it was amplified in hospitals, causing many deaths.

From 2015 to 2016, Zika spread across the Americas. This outbreak provided a valuable learning opportunity for public health officials regarding the challenging topics that require specialised risk communication, such as issues surrounding women's reproductive health.

Due to the 2016 outbreak of Yellow Fever in Africa, public health practitioners had to learn how to communicate health-related messages about new formulations of vaccines, while at the same time vaccinating thirty to forty million people in a short period. Risk communication and social science interventions played a significant role in these activities.

Step by Step: Communicating Risk for an Influenza Outbreak

From these experiences, public health organizations have significantly improved their practice. Over the last twenty to thirty years, they have learned that every agency and individual involved in risk communication must create and maintain trust. Moreover, it has become clear that public health officials must acknowledge and communicate risk even when they don't necessarily have all the facts—and be honest about it. Communicating amid uncertainty requires skill and courage, but if it is *not* done, the result will be misinformation, rumors, and a lack of trust.

Effective risk communication also requires coordination. An official might be working in a lab, on a surveillance team, or as part of a response team, but there may be many other players with whom they must coordinate information sharing and risk communication. Depending on the outbreak, this might include the animal health sector.

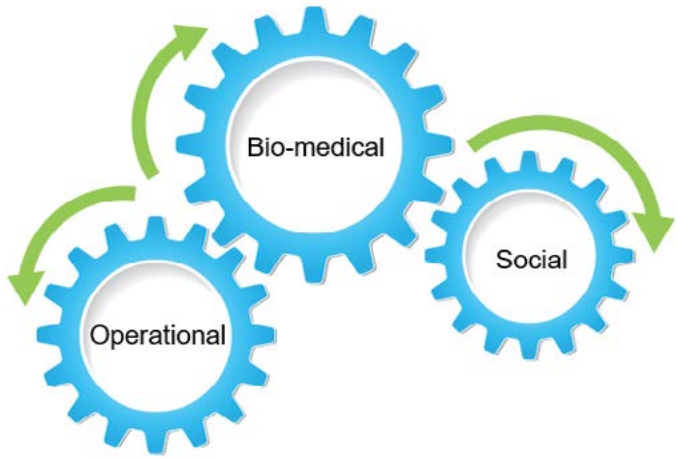

Figure 5. The paradigm for readiness and response.

Public health practitioners must be quick and transparent in their risk communication, especially near the start of an outbreak. If public health practitioners are not the first to communicate risk during an outbreak, they will spend the rest of the outbreak trying to correct misinformation.

The expertise of the WHO lies in the central cog of the wheel in Figure 5—biomedical expertise. The WHO is an evidence-based, science-based, bio-medical organization. As a result of organizational reform, it has also become operational. To adapt, the organization must integrate social science approaches, including risk communication, into its biomedical and operational work. In integrating these, the organization will have a much better chance of detecting and responding to outbreaks, epidemics, and pandemics.

The opportunities for risk communication exist across a broad spectrum of situations, as shown in the influenza example in Figure 6, from the emergence of zoonotic disease to preparedness and early detection, from managing the progress of an outbreak and its localized transmission to containment, mitigation, and control in the case of an epidemic or pandemic. For each stage in this process, there are different risk communication strategies, tactics, and other tools that must be employed.

Communicating Risk for an Outbreak of Zoonotic Influenza

To respond to an outbreak of zoonotic influenza, public health practitioners must ask:

- Which animals are risk factors in the spread of the disease?
- What is the economic and cultural context of the outbreak?

Public health practitioners must be quick and transparent in their risk communication, especially near the start of an outbreak.

- Who should be responsible, in this context, for delivering public health-related messages and when should they relay them?

Questions like these are only examples of those that should be asked at the onset of an outbreak of zoonotic influenza. During such an outbreak, the collaboration between the animal, human, food, trade, and livestock sectors must be well coordinated. In the past, at the global level, the WHO has worked closely with the World Organisation for Animal Health and has also engaged in joint risk communication activities with actors at the local level.

Communicating Risk for an Outbreak of Seasonal Influenza

For seasonal influenza outbreaks, public health practitioners must target messages toward communities most at risk. They must ask questions like:

- What is the prevailing perception of the outbreak among affected communities?
- What is the current use of pharmaceutical and non-pharmaceutical interventions?
- Is the flu vaccine used in the affected country?
- What are people's perceptions of non-pharmaceutical interventions?

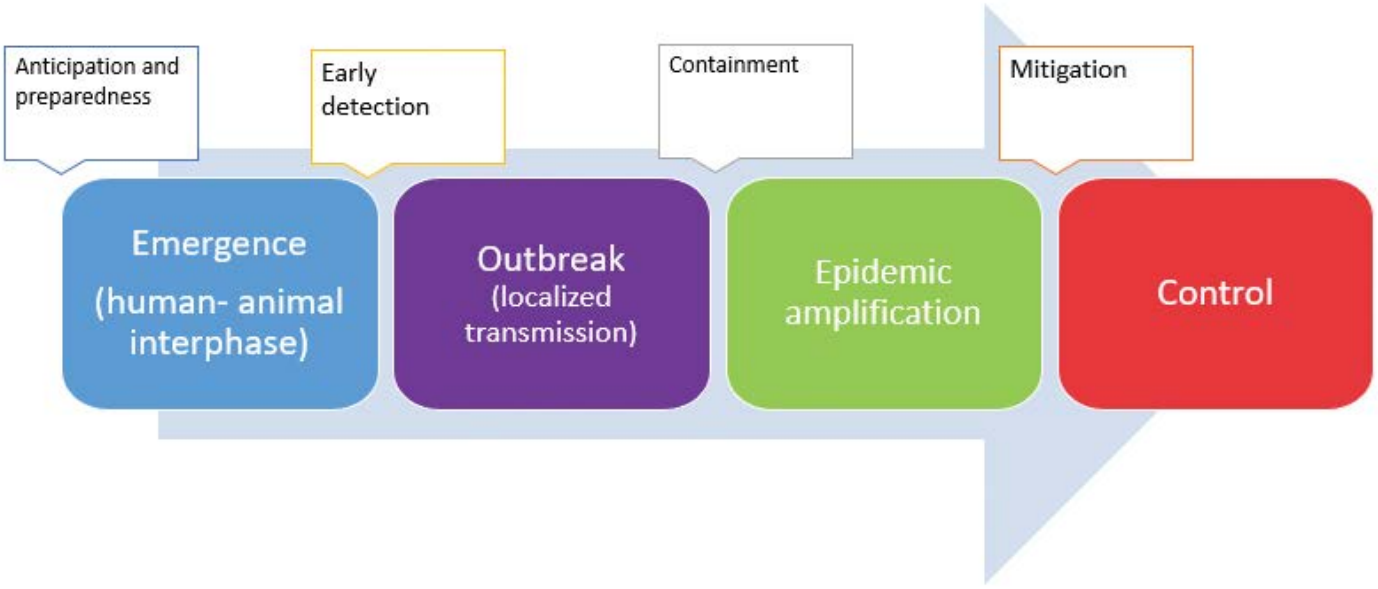

Figure 6. Possible intervention points for effective risk communication for influenza.

- Are people aware of the benefits of regular hand-washing or proper respiratory etiquette, like coughing and sneezing into one's sleeve?
- Are people aware of the benefits of social distancing? If not, who would they trust to communicate risk to them?

Communicating Risk for an Outbreak of Pandemic Influenza

An outbreak of pandemic influenza can be devastating. Here, public health officials must ask:

- Who is most at risk?
- What are the prevailing perceptions that surround the outbreak?
- Will people be complacent because the last outbreak of pandemic influenza, in 2009, was relatively mild?

Public health officials might also be faced with vaccine hesitancy from those who do not trust the vaccine or perhaps don't understand how it is developed. According to the WHO's Regional Office for Europe (EURO), the reasons for vaccine hesitancy vary widely across the member states. Effectively responding to vaccine hesitancy requires an understanding of the relevant "complex web of social issues" and a systemic approach to grasping the impact of culture on perceptions of health and well-being (EURO 2018). In such situations, public health practitioners must ask:

- What is the current use of vaccines, antivirals, and non-pharmaceutical interventions in the affected areas?
- Who is trusted to communicate risk or give advice in this situation?
- Are the concerns of the general public being listened to?

These are some of the questions that public health practitioners should ask during any of the three hypothetical scenarios described in this article.

Part of a risk communicator's job is ensuring that community influencers and leaders engage with their messages.

Conclusion

The basic principles to remember for risk communication are:

- First, create and maintain trust.
- Second, understand, listen to, and address the perceptions and concerns of at-risk populations.
- Third, communicate frequently, and be proactive and transparent.

The major challenge concerning emergency risk communication is building and maintaining trust. One-way, evidence-based communication inhibits effective engagement of communities. People might politely listen, but that doesn't guarantee that they will follow the advice given. As a result, community engagement with affected communities must be at the center of risk communication. Part of a risk communicator's job is ensuring that community influencers and leaders engage with their messages.

Translational communication—presenting the scientific, epidemiological, and laboratory work in a format and language that laypeople and affected communities can understand—is also important for effective risk communication. It is key to avoid the assumption that senior officials and decision-makers might understand this information. Public health officials must be aware of their

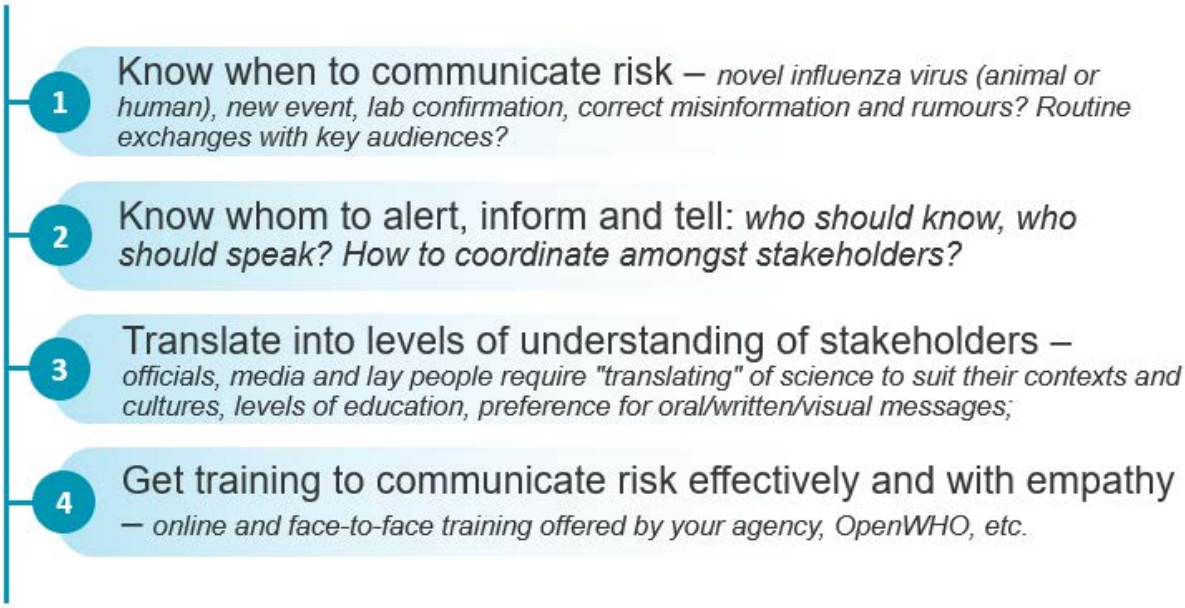
1
Know when to communicate risk – novel influenza virus (animal or human), new event, lab confirmation, correct misinformation and rumours? Routine exchanges with key audiences?
2
Know whom to alert, inform and tell: who should know, who should speak? How to coordinate amongst stakeholders?
3
Translate into levels of understanding of stakeholders – officials, media and lay people require "translating" of science to suit their contexts and cultures, levels of education, preference for oral/written/visual messages;
4
Get training to communicate risk effectively and with empathy – online and face-to-face training offered by your agency, OpenWHO, etc.

Figure 7. Four steps for achieving effective risk communication.

jargon and terminology and the fact that the audience might not always express that they don't understand.

Furthermore, public health work for pandemic influenza requires stakeholder coordination and community engagement, and most importantly, dynamic listening. Tools, such as social media surveillance, partner stakeholder feedback, anthropology, and knowledge-attitude practice studies, may be used. Public health practitioners engaged in risk communication must be aware of these tools and be able to involve and assist the experts who do this work.

All public health experts must understand risk communication and their role in communicating risk. The four steps for risk communication, as shown in Figure 7, are to:

- Know when to communicate risk.
- Know who is most appropriate to communicate risk to the public and understand who your audience is.
- Engage in translational communication.
- Share information appropriately between relevant stakeholders, officials, media, and laypeople.

Don't forget to translate materials into the local languages of affected communities. Translational communication isn't just about language but also accounting for the health belief model (HBM) of affected communities.

To be prepared, risk communication training should begin as soon as possible before an outbreak. To assist with this, the WHO can offer online and face-to-face training in risk communication. The WHO has also developed materials for specific outbreaks, such as a Zika app, which contains all of the relevant information regarding Zika. The WHO's Learning and Capacity Development Unit has also developed an online knowledge-transfer platform called OpenWHO.org, which includes courses on all aspects of health emergencies, including risk communication.

Ultimately, the primary lesson public health officials have learned over the past few decades is to *communicate risk before it's too late.* Unfortunately, the image of Ebola that has lingered in the public conscience is one characterized by the unknown, a lack of community engagement, and poor risk communication around safe and dignified burials. Risk communication must start *before* an epidemic begins if we are to prevent such a situation from arising again. Every public health professional has a role in this.

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Two *Technical Communication* Articles Take Honors at CCCC

SAM DRAGGA, EDITOR, *Technical Communication,* recently shared the good news: two articles published in the journal received CCCC awards.

"All Vietnamese Men Are Brothers: Rhetorical Strategies and Community Engagement Practices Used to Support Victims of Agent Orange" by Rebecca Walton and Sara Beth Hopton in the August 2018 issue of *Technical Communication* (65.3: pp 309-325) is the winner of the 2020 CCCC Award for Best Article Reporting Qualitative or Quantitative Research in Technical or Scientific Communication.

"Technologies of Disenfranchisement: Literacy Tests and Black Voters in the US from 1890 to 1965" by Natasha N. Jones and Miriam F. Williams in the November 2018 issue of *Technical Communication* (65.4: pp 371-386) is the winner of the 2020 CCCC Award for Best Article Reporting Historical Research or Textual Studies in Technical and Scientific Communication. This article was published in the special issue on election technologies guest edited by Godwin Agboka and Isidore Dorpenyo.

Awards will be given on Friday, March 27, at the 2020 Convention of CCCC (College Composition and Communication) in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Congratulations to the authors!

Upcoming Online Courses

TechComm Fundamentals Bootcamp

INSTRUCTOR: Leah Guren
24 March through 5 May 2020 (Tuesdays) | 11:30 AM – 1:00 PM ET (GMT -4)

TechComm Fundamentals Bootcamp is the fastest, most efficient way to jump-start your career in technical communication. It covers key theory that you can immediately apply to your work. It also gives you the skills you need to continue to learn and grow.

Each element of theory is presented with hands-on exercises, real-world examples, and plenty of discussion. The course is sure to leave you feeling enthusiastic and well prepared to get started in the field.

Instructional Design for Technical Communicators

INSTRUCTOR: Saul Carliner
24 March through 14 April (Tuesdays) | 1:30 to 3:00 PM ET (GMT -4)

This four-session, online course provides you with the skills needed to successfully produce effective learning programs, including following the ADDIE approach, writing instructional objectives, developing criterion-referenced quizzes and tests, describing the dominant Kirkpatrick model of evaluation, choosing an instructional strategy then applying it, and creating engaging, supportive instructional programs.

Tech Comm Bootcamp 2.0: Beyond the Fundamentals

INSTRUCTOR: Leah Guren
26 March through 30 April (Thursdays) No class on 9 April | 11:30 AM – 1:00 PM EDT (GMT -4)

This course presents more advanced concepts to TC practitioners who may still be within their first three years in the profession. It covers topics that are beyond the scope of the introductory courses, such as TC Fundamentals Bootcamp.

Read more and register at www.stc.org/education/online-courses.

Presenting the 2020 Class of Associate Fellows

THE SOCIETY FOR Technical Communication is proud to announce the 2020 class of Associate Fellows. Associate Fellow is one of the three honorary ranks in the Society. It is the second highest rank that the Society can confer upon a member, Fellow being the highest. This honor recognizes members for their outstanding achievements in, and contributions to, the arts and science of technical communication and for sustained and significant service to STC.

Associate Fellows retain this honorary rank for life, unless they are elevated to the rank of Fellow.

To be considered for Associate Fellow, a candidate must have:

- Been active in technical communication for at least 15 years
- Fulfilled ten years of service as an STC Member (with at least five years at the level of Senior Member), as of the application submission deadline.

The Society will formally recognize the new Associate Fellows at the Technical Communication Summit Conference & Expo in Bellevue, WA, at the Honors Event on Sunday, 17 May, from 5:30-7:00 p.m.

Congratulations to our newest Associate Fellows:

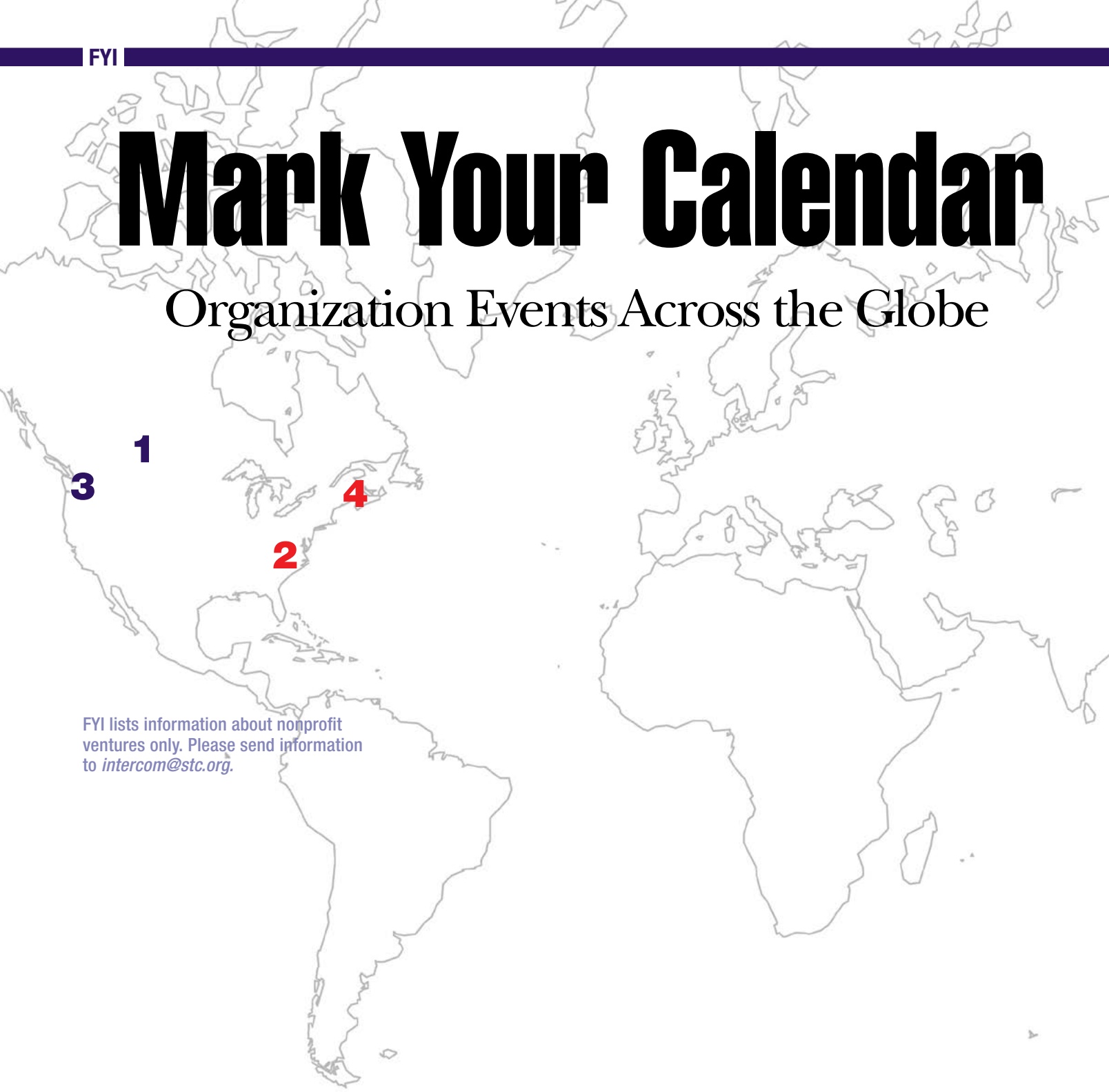
- **Alyssa Fox,** for service to the Society in a variety of roles, including STC President and Secretary, and for the advancement of professional development in content strategy, customer experience, and managing global teams.
- **Elizabeth Fraley,** for sharing her technical knowledge, encouraging others to expand their skills, and working to build connections in the technical communication community.
- **Elizabeth Herman,** for championing technical communicators through teaching, mentoring, and advocacy, while demonstrating the value of the technical communicator in project management and leadership roles.
- **Miles Kimball,** for expanding the scope of technical communication through scholarship, for contributing to the education and professional development of technical communicators, and for service to the Society and its members.
- **Karen Levine,** for service to the Society as a volunteer, mentor, and community leader, and for consistent support of technical communication practitioners throughout her career and Society service.
- **Ed Marsh,** for promotion of the profession and practitioners of technical communication through social media and other channels, and for service to the Society.
- **Michael Opsteegh,** for contributions to the Society as a leader and volunteer, and for his commitment to educating the next generation of technical communicators.
- **Carmel Priore-Garlock,** for career successes spanning academia and industry, for service to numerous community organizations, and for sustained leadership and support of STC's Rochester Chapter and the Spectrum conference.
- **Jamye Sagan,** for sharing knowledge of technical communication and instructional design through creative extracurricular interests, and for continuous and varied service as a Society volunteer.

Share Your Story with *Intercom*

WE'RE LOOKING FOR members to contribute a first-person column for a future issue of *Intercom*. The magazine has several member-focused columns: My Job (your day-to-day work), Off Hours (discussing your hobby or side gig), Looking Back (a senior STC member discusses the history or significant moments in tech comm), Witful Thinking (tech comm humor), and In Memoriam (remembering STC members who have passed on). My Job takes a look at the day-to-daywork of an STC member and what makes the job interesting, fun, or unique. Off Hours is a look at the side jobs and hobbies our members have. And Looking Back focuses on senior members providing perspective earned throughout their career. Would you like to share your story with *Intercom* readers? Email Sarah Black at sarah.black@stc.org for more information, samples, and to volunteer!

Mark Your Calendar

Organization Events Across the Globe



FYI lists information about nonprofit ventures only. Please send information to *intercom@stc.org.*

1 4 March 2020
The **Alberta Chapter of STC** will hold its 2020 Annual General Meeting from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. in Calgary, AB, Calgary.
https://www.stc-alberta.org/archives/7125

2 23-35 April 2020
The **American Society for Indexing (ASI)** will hold its 2020 conference in Raleigh, NC.
https://www.asindexing.org/conference-2020/

3 15-18 May 2020
The **Society for Technical Communication (STC)** will hold its 2020 STC Summit in Bellevue, WA.
https://summit.stc.org/

4 27-29 May 2020
The **Society for Scholarly Publishing (SSP)** will hold its 42nd annual meeting at the Westin Waterfront in Boston, MA.
https://customer.sspnet.org/ssp/AM20/Home

* STC-related event

Editing More than Words

BY MICHELLE CORBIN | *STC Senior Member*

IN MY PRIOR "Editing Matters" column (see Resources), I explored the idea of how technical editors are advocates of quality, or as I like to say, arbiters of quality (it's the name of my professional blog). For me, it all comes back to the argument that technical editing is a quality assurance process, whereby technical editors must verify the quality of the entire technical communication product and not just the words.

I've actually been musing about this idea of "editing more than just the words" for almost a decade, publishing an *Intercom* article about editing embedded assistance (see Resources), writing a blog post (titled "Let Go of the Words?"), working a module into the STC Technical Editing Fundamentals certificate course that I co-taught with Linda Oestreich, and most recently, presenting this topic at a WritersUA East conference in 2018.

Thinking Differently About Technical Communication Materials

As technical communicators, we deliver all types of technical communication materials—print, online, and multimedia. All of these certainly contain words, but they contain so much more than words. In fact, I would argue that all of these have user interfaces. Why am I making a connection between technical communication materials and user interfaces? Because I think this concept helps us step away from focusing on just the words.

Wikipedia defines a user interface in these words:

> *The user interface (UI), in the industrial design field of human–machine interaction, is the space where interaction between humans and machines occurs. The goal of interaction between a human and a machine at the user interface is effective operation and control of the machine and feedback from the machine which [sic] aids the operator in making operational decisions.*

They provide examples of hardware and software user interfaces, but I believe that our technical communication materials—whether they are in print, online, or multimedia formats—are also a user interface, as they are a "space where interaction between humans and machines occur." You might say that the technical communication materials are an extension of the hardware or software and become a part of the interaction. For example, *instruction booklets* for putting together furniture become user interfaces to all that hardware in the box. Consider, as well, your printer and the iconography on the status display or on the paper drawer.

Let's look at each type of technical communication material and see how we can edit more than just the words.

- **Printed materials**, including books, reports, pamphlets, and quick-reference cards. While we obviously consider tables of content and indexes in the longer forms of printed materials, what should technical editors consider about the user interface of pamphlets and quick-reference cards? What about the quality of the card stock on which it is printed? What about the amount of whitespace used in what's likely to be a single piece of paper? Both elements have an impact on the experience users have with this user interface for the product.
- **Online materials**, including PDF files, online help files, embedded user assistance, online documentation, and Web pages. Because these are delivered online, it is sometimes easier to see the connection to the software user interface (especially with embedded user assistance being an integrated part of a product's user interface). What else should technical editors consider to be part of a user interface, where they should go beyond editing the words? Consider a Web-based online documentation system: How is the linked content displayed to the user, either replacing the existing window or opening in a new window or in a pop-up window? If different styles of linking are available, the editor must be aware of these link styles and know which type of interaction their users need.
- **Multimedia materials**, including animation, screencasts, videos, and podcasts. While technical editors can certainly edit the words that display or are heard in these types of multimedia materials, technical editors need to consider whether the tone of voice of the speaker is going to lull the users to sleep, and they should consider whether the animation is too simplistic to communicate the technical concept.

In Editing Matters, Michelle Corbin covers matters (topics) about editing that matter (are of consequence) to communicators of all kinds. Watch this space to understand more about editing and what you can do to improve the quality of your content. To suggest a topic or ask a question, contact Michelle at *michelle.l.corbin@gmail.com.*

Editing User Interactions

To be an effective technical editor and edit these user interfaces—and the user interactions—we must get involved earlier in the process in the design phase. Andrea Ames has frequently said (see Resources) that technical communicators need to "think more, write less," and contribute to the design of the interaction, not just the design of the information. This idea of "less is more" is also weaved throughout Ginny Redish's chapters on purposes, personas, and conversations in *Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content that Works* (see Resources).

Finally, I acknowledge that the words are part of user interaction, and we must be able to choose the right ones in the user interfaces we are developing. I stumbled across a wonderful UX Booth article, "The Grammar of Interactivity," that does a great job of marrying the words to the user interaction design—specifically in the case of buttons, but I believe that his argument can be applied to other user interface elements as well.

Let me wrap up this column with what seems to be my common refrain: Technical editors must know their users and those users' tasks to understand the user interactions, consider all of the words in the users' contexts, and ultimately go beyond editing more than just the words.

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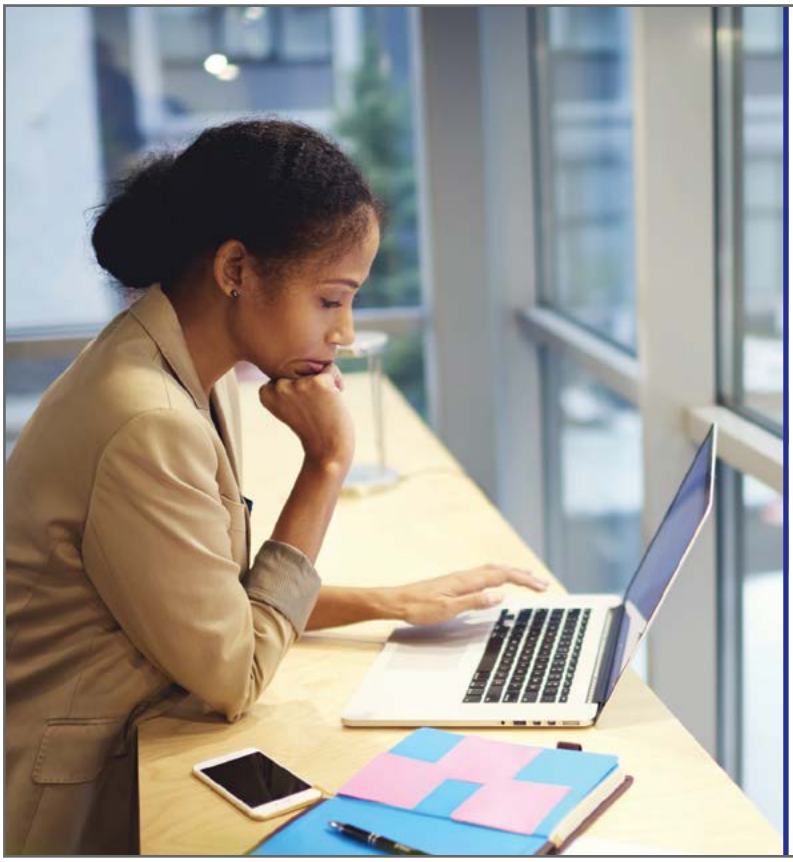

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Preparing for the Future in Tech Comm and Dealing with Workplace Bullying

Tech Comm is changing rapidly. How can I best prepare myself for the future?

BY CINDY CURRIE | *STC Fellow* and
KIT BROWN-HOEKSTRA | *STC Fellow*

ONE OF THE challenges (and advantages) in our field is that, just when you have become an expert in something, it changes, and you have to learn something new. Yet the fundamentals stay the same. First, ensure you have a solid grounding in the fundamentals (see Resources):

- Project planning and analysis
- Content development (including common document types, instructional design basics)
- Content organization and design (including the basics of content modeling, structured authoring)
- Written communication (including indexing basics)
- Review and editing
- Visual communication
- Content management
- Production and delivery

The future of technical communication is visual and interactive. A knowledge of game design, storyboarding, storytelling, video production, and basic graphic design would make you a valuable resource.

Think about how you can apply your existing skills to a new environment. What things do you enjoy the most? Focus on those areas and build from your strengths. Go where your interests and curiosity take you. Take classes, go to conferences and workshops. When looking for job opportunities, look for positions that stretch you—where you can both contribute to the team *and* learn.

Remember: You can't possibly be an expert in every aspect of technical communication, so look to your network for people who are experts in areas where you are not. Ask questions, and be helpful to them, as well.

I was bullied by a coworker, and I thought I had moved on. Yet, management continues to throw us together on projects. What can I do?

First, we are sorry that this happened to you. It's an awful situation to find yourself in. This is a difficult and complex situation. If you didn't report the bullying to your manager and HR, they might not be aware of it. Make sure that your manager fully understands the issue before taking the next step. If you did report it, and your manager is ignoring the problem, then you need to escalate up the chain of command and involve HR. If the bullying is severe enough to affect your mental and emotional well-being, please see a counselor to help you work through the issues.

Bullying only survives in silence. Ignoring it doesn't usually work. Confronting the bully directly often doesn't work, either. If you do confront them, however, don't ask them to stop; *tell* them that they are behaving inappropriately, and they need to stop (this is most effective in front of other people). Document the bullying with dates, times, and circumstances. Practice self-care. Educate yourself. Build a support team outside of work.

Also, examine ways you can change the interaction to improve the outcome. If multiple people are contributing to the bullying, identify the instigator, and figure out how to neutralize them (most bullies are very weak and use bullying to make themselves look strong). Don't buy into their narrative, and if you see someone else being bullied, stand up for them.

Sadly, in some cases, it might be best if you find another job. It's not fair, we know—especially if you like your job except for the bully—but consider this: You spend most of your waking hours during the week at work. Life is too short to spend it stressed out and unhappy. Staying in a damaging situation isn't going to teach the bully a lesson; it's just going to make you miserable. You deserve to have a safe, collegial, supportive work environment.

Ask a Tech Comm Manager is an advice column geared toward answering all those questions you have, but might be uncomfortable asking. We glean the questions from social media, forums, and most importantly, from you, dear reader. If we don't know an answer, we will interview experts and get information for you. Send us your questions to *kitbh.stc@gmail.com* or tweet them to *@kitcomgenesis* or the hashtag *#askTCmgr*.

RESOURCES

STC's Foundation certification: *https://www.stc.org/certification/*.
TED Talk: *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YmRKlZEXVQM*.
The Muse blog post: *https://www.themuse.com/advice/how-to-deal-with-workplace-bullies*.
Workplace Bullying Institute: *https://www.workplacebullying.org/individuals/problem/definition*.

"Fluff, Hookie, and Piffle": The Academic Style in Technical Communication

BY THOMAS BARKER | *STC Fellow*

THE THREE WORDS in this column's title are all taken from the professors' comments on papers I wrote as an undergraduate student. These comments highlighted what continues to be a problem in academic (and all) writing: *Too many words and not enough meaning.*

This column is in response to a conversation that emerged in the STC Academic SIG discussion list. One SIG member remarked: "Why do academics/educators insist on writing—regardless of audience demographics—in the same style they were required to write for [in] their dissertations and the like?" The question is fair enough:

Dmitry Volkov/iStock

Academic writers should know how to write for different audiences. The requirement should sink in. We are fortunate in the Academic SIG discussion list to have participants like this person and others who persist in following up on their passion for language and writing and their commitment to effective communication.

This article explores the academic style as a matter of what is sometimes called *register* and looking at how register helps us understand the communication breakdown, or dissonance, between academics and technical communicators. Knowing the mysteries of register can be helpful in a multitude of communication situations.

The Academic Style

The issue of academic style refers to diction, sentence length, and tone that comes across as stiff, formal, and wordy. Here is a made-up example of the academic style:

> Scholarship in communication, as well as best practices in the discipline, suggest that opening a file using the menu command "open" is a paradigmatic response in computer-based work that, properly imbricated throughout an organization, has an ontological effect on the way organizations share information internally. Thus, for users in this environment, cultural and operational identity and functionality parallel the concept of "openness" and "security" inscribed in computer support discourse.

This example is extreme, but it shows some familiar, irritating touch-points:

- The term "paradigmatic" (my spell checker doesn't even recognize that word) rather than "usual"
- The long, complex sentences
- The stuffy repetitions of synonyms using "and" in the second sentence

These examples contrast with clear technical writing, or as the inquirer in the SIG list said, "Have the ideas of 'people first,' active voice, 'less (words) is more,' and 'plain or universal English' just not pierced your professional ranks?" Using technical communication style we might just say, "Choose Open from the File menu."

These are strong assertions, but I admit I deserve them sometimes. Recently a colleague advised me to cut the jargon and come up with some clear examples, as a way of improving a scholarly paper. Interestingly, I was *not* told to use bigger words or long formal sentences. As a matter of fact, Joseph Williams, in *Lessons in Style and Grace* (University of Chicago Press, 1990), points out that it's not the length of the sentence, but the logical flow of ideas that often determines its clarity.

So what is the problem? For some it is just laziness, because someone is not willing to put out the effort needed for clarity. But for others it is the inability to shift from one *register* of writing to another. In writing, what is the notion of *register* and why does it matter?

What Is a *Register?*

Register is a little discussed, but important, aspect of writing that pertains to our issue of why academics can't write simply and plainly. For some, like author Ali Luke, in "Writing Tips: Understanding Register—And Why It Matters," *register* pertains to the degree of formality of writing. Says Luke, "Register is the level of formality of a piece of writing: It's something slightly separate from what we might call tone or style." The formality of a piece of writing can either be formal or informal, business-like or conversational. Blog posts, emails, and formal notifications can be adjusted (in word choice and sentence length) to follow grammatical rules rigidly, or to take liberties with grammar. Such as a sentence fragment.

Recently a colleague advised me to cut the jargon and come up with some clear examples, as a way of improving a scholarly paper.

However, the notion of register can go beyond considerations of formality and informality. The term was first used in the 1950s by linguistics scholars to refer to the *context* within which language is used. The phrase that M.A.K. Halliday coined at the time was meant to refer to "a configuration of situational features," which we might think of as the context of speech or text. Registers, then, can refer to any number of types of communication (blogs, emails, reports, statutes). Thus, speech might be considered less formal, and text more formal. What's more, variations exist within these registers that replicate the formal-to-less-formal continuum. Some text forms, like a résumé or a court order, use more formal grammar and diction (for example, "place of work"), and some text, like a text message to a friend, uses less formal grammar and diction (for example, "my gig").

Register can also refer to specific words that appear to have synonymous meanings, but actually have different meanings given their divergent registers. For example, the word "vulgar" can mean language spoken by normal people, or it can mean profanity. It depends on the user. Douglas Biber, from Northern Arizona University, conducted a study of texts from four registers:

- Conversation
- Fiction
- Newspaper language
- Academic prose

Biber found that grammatical characteristics (verbs and pronouns) were actually used to fit the typical communicative characteristics of the register. The suggestion here is that registers differ based on attention to the users of the information rather than specific grammatical features. Biber says that registers interact with a host of textual factors in complex ways.

What Is the Technical Communication Register?

We know that academics use language suitable in a formal register. But what is the typical register for technical communication? The respondent in the Academic SIG discussion cited plain English, people first, and active voice as characteristic grammatical features of the technical communication register. I agree that technical communication tends to be more conversational and thus aligned with the informality of the spoken word. Textbooks that we use for technical communication routinely cite a conversational style for technical communication. Work by some scholars has confirmed a conversational give and take in the interaction of the user and the technology. "I chose Open from the File menu, now what?"

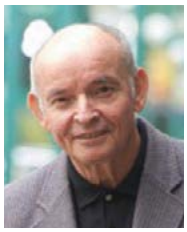
Our analysis of the various meanings of the term *register* can show how important it is, and why it is difficult to adjust for it. Register can refer to the formality of writing, but also to what some call registers of representation. Looking to the theory of semiotics shows how words signal ideas as a way of producing meaning. Signs, in semiotics, communicate meaning, but do not make the meaning. The word is assigned to the meaning through inscriptions created by individuals, by academics, and by technical communicators. So it is just that: A "register" is an organized system of signs that collectively define people and their activities.

> Register can also refer to specific words that appear to have synonymous meanings, but actually have different meanings given their divergent registers.

Why can't people simply speak to those who understand their register (the given, accepted domain that gives meaning of words)? I would like to suggest that the fault lies not in the registers and language systems that support them, but in the human tendency to step out of confining work pathways and try something new. The discussion that I mentioned earlier—the one whose posts promoted this exploration of words and meanings—attracted some responses from other members. One response illustrates a continuing, frustrating problem of out-of-register language use.

An editor noted that she advised a student to rewrite a passage in a medical communication to remove the fluff, hookie, and piffle (although these words were not used). The "punch line" for the instructor, when the student complained that she just wanted to "sound like an academic," was that non-English speaking readers might get confused by such complex diction and sentences. "You want them to understand too, right?" she said.

Register, it turns out, is a useful term (borrowed as it is from the linguistic register!) to sort out just why formal language leaves us frustrated. The problem is not just that the person wants to sound academic, but that they are on the boundary and trying to communicate between groups or registers of readers. As we have seen, one group's fluff is another group's knowledge. The problem might just be one of managing the two language registers, rather than adopting one or the other.



This column focuses on a broad range of practical academic issues from teaching and training to professional concerns, research, and technologies of interest to teachers, students, and researchers. Please send comments and suggestions to column editor Thomas Barker at *ttbarker@ualberta.ca.*

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Musings of a Creative (Technical) Writer

BY ALLISON DEROSE | *STC Member*

THE OTHER DAY, I read a quote that was hard for me to swallow. The quote went something like this: "The ultimate goal of a technical writer is to be invisible." At first, I immediately rejected the notion. I mean, who wants to be completely invisible, especially in their writing? Is that really supposed to be my "ultimate goal?" That just seems lame and underachieving and, honestly, kind of a cop out. Then I kept reading and was forced to reconsider.

The quote continued: "Users don't notice great writing, because they are too busy getting their job done." Ah. Now it made sense, right? Someone isn't going to stop in the middle of assembling a home gym and say, "Man, that was a beautiful, flawless sentence. This tech writer is a genius!" I admit that I do this quite often while reading other literature. I will read a line of poetry, close my eyes, take a deep breath, and just let the words marinate for a minute while I fully appreciate every flavor. If you ever see me with a book in hand and my eyes closed, I promise that I am not sleeping; I am marinating and appreciating.

In technical writing, being appreciated as a great writer looks a bit different. It looks like someone finishing the final step, making sure there are no extra screws or parts laying around, carelessly (or triumphantly) tossing the instruction booklet aside, and then taking a step back to admire a job well done (usually with arms crossed or hands on hips in an overall stance of pride, victory, and satisfaction).

Despite this understanding, I still was reluctant to admit that I had to make myself invisible to be successful as a technical writer. My entire academic career was all about being seen, being heard, being vulnerable and exposed. I have a Masters in English Creative Writing. I am a poet. I excel in stripping down metaphorical walls and laying my open mind on the page in bare words. I spent countless hours in workshops, discussing intent and meaning, and was evaluated on how I developed my voice through the written word. Within my poems, I am inherently visible in every line. So how, as a newly employed technical writer, was I supposed to cloak a technique that I had studied and worked so tirelessly to uncover? Ensuring visibility had become my first, second, and third nature. It was my comfort zone.

The aspect of poetry that I fell in love with is its deliberateness. Each poem is carefully crafted. Each word, each line break, each punctuation mark is chosen for a reason and has a purpose. If it doesn't have a purpose, then it doesn't belong. Each choice made in poetry leads to a consequence. For example, changing a line break by one word can evolve the meaning of the line into an extended metaphor or can smooth out the rhythm where it was previously syncopated. Writing poetry is a tedious practice of awareness.

Starting this technical writing job, I had to convince myself that poetry and technical documentation were not that different and that I was not diving into something completely unknown with absolutely no prior experience. I soon came to realize, however, that I did not need as much convincing as I originally thought, because that idea was proving to be truer than I ever imagined it could be. I realized that the similarity lies in the deliberateness of both types of writing, and I knew that was the reason I was drawn to technical writing in the first place. Every decision made when writing a poem is deliberate, and this absolutely holds true for technical writing as well.

Then I considered another question: Is it possible to be deliberate and invisible at the same time? I looked up the definition for "invisible" and noticed the gist of the definitions was something that is not seen, not visible, not viewed. This word, then, seems to tie into the sense of vision. I think that when it is thought of this way, calling a technical writer "invisible" makes sense. We are not perceptible outright when someone reads one of our sentences, but our deliberate choices make us deeply embedded within the documentation. We are not the type of invisible that makes us not valuable. We are invisible in the way that makes us the most qualified, unobtrusive guides. We make tasks as effortless as possible, while remaining humbly hidden. It is not, as it is in poetry, our goal to be noticed.

In my own personal experience, I find this to be true. In technical documentation, I only notice poor writing: When spelling mistakes are made, when word choice is askew, when run-on sentences cause me to lose my place on the page and to read the same line four times. I only notice the writing when I become frustrated because I cannot finish the task and blame the writer.

After I finish writing a poem, I hand it to someone to read, and the first thing nearly everyone says is, "This is great! But what does it mean?" That is my favorite question, and my reply is always, "What do you think it means?" Poetry is all about self-analysis and personal interpretation. Technical documentation is the exact opposite. If someone picks up a user manual and says, "What does this mean?" you have essentially failed as a technical writer. As technical writers, we can't leave room for interpretation. We have to tell the user exactly what they need to know and make sure that it is undeniably unambiguous, which is accomplished through the careful choices that we make as we write.

Thus I have learned that, as a technical writer, my goal is to be an invisible guide, and my success is defined by the success of others. This was something that I had to get used to. Am I writing creatively? Not necessarily. But I am writing deliberately. To me, that is all that matters.

ALLISON DEROSE (arderose@gmail.com) *is a technical communicator from Rochester, New York. She is a Certified Professional Technical Communicator and a published poet. In her spare time, Allison enjoys playing tennis, photographing nature, drinking coffee, and spending time with her family and rescue dog, Gracie.*

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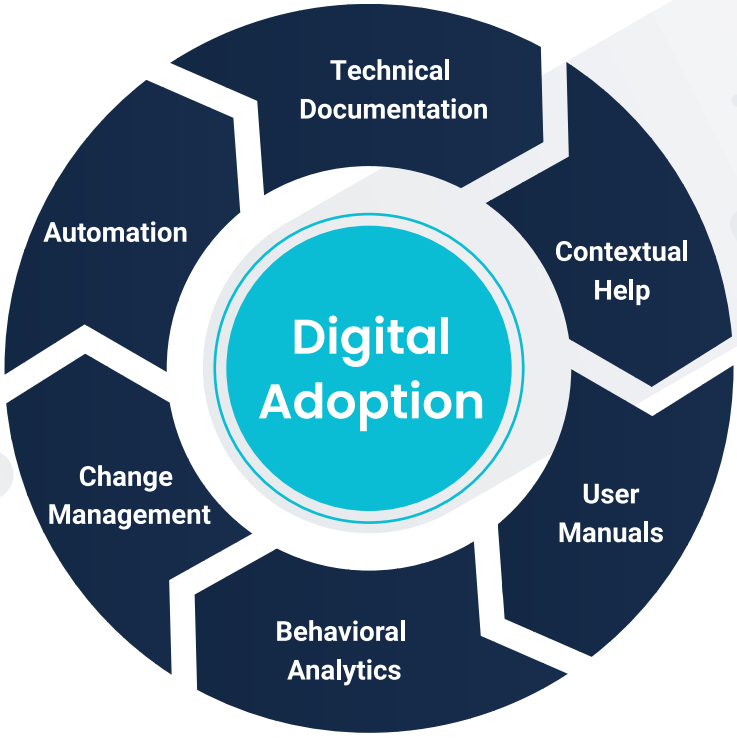

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